

# THE SELF-ASSERTION OF THE GERMAN UNIVERSITY

Assuming the rectorship means committing oneself to leading this university *spiritually and intellectually*. The teachers and students who constitute the rector's following [*Gefolgschaft der Lehrer und Schüler*] will awaken and gain strength only through being truly and collectively rooted in the essence of the German university. This essence will attain clarity, rank, and power, however, only when the leaders are, first and foremost and at all times, themselves led by the inexorability of that spiritual mission which impresses onto the fate of the German Volk the stamp of their history.

Do we know of this spiritual mission? Whether yes or no, the question remains unavoidable: are we, the teachers and students of this "high" school, truly and collectively rooted in the essence of the German university? Does this essence truly have the power to shape our existence? It does, but only if we *will* this essence fully. But who would wish to doubt that? The predominant, essential character of the university is generally considered to reside in its "self-governance"; this shall be preserved. But have we also fully considered what this claim to the right of self-governance demands of us?

Self-governance means: to set ourselves the task and to determine ourselves the way and means of realizing that task in order to be what we ourselves ought to be. But do we know *who we ourselves are*, this body of teachers and students at the highest school of the German Volk? *Can* we know that at all, without the most constant and most uncompromising and harshest *self-examination* [*Selbstbesinnung*]?

Neither knowledge of the conditions that prevail today at the university nor familiarity with its earlier history guarantees sufficient knowl-

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edge of the essence of the university unless we first delimit, clearly and uncompromisingly, this essence for the future; in such self-limitation, *will* it; and, in this willing, *assert* ourselves.

Self-governance can exist only on the basis of self-examination. Self-examination, however, can only take place on the strength of the *self-assertion* of the German university. Will we carry this out, and how?

The self-assertion of the German university is the original, common will to its essence. We regard the German university as the "high" school which from science [*Wissenschaft*]\* and through science, educates and disciplines the leaders and guardians of the fate of the German Volk. The will to the essence of the German university is the will to science as the will to the historical spiritual mission of the German Volk as a Volk that knows itself in its state. Science and German fate must come to power at *the same time* in the will to essence. And they will do this then and *only* then when we—the teachers and students—expose science to its innermost necessity, *on the one hand*, and, *on the other*, when we stand firm in the face of German fate extreme in its extreme distress [*Not*].

We will, to be sure, not experience the essence of science in its innermost necessity as long as we simply—talking about the "new concept of science"—provide for the independence and freedom from presuppositions of a science that is all too contemporary. This activity, which is simply negating and scarcely looks back beyond the last decades, has virtually taken on the appearance of a true effort to understand the essence of science.

If we wish to grasp the essence of science, then we must first ask ourselves the decisive question: should science still continue to *exist* for us in the future, or ought we to let it drift off to a quick end? That

\* Translator's note: Though the German "*Wissenschaft*" is frequently translated as "science," it is slightly misleading in the context at hand to so render it. For Heidegger's employment of the word harks back to the "authentic" German philosophical meaning of the word as "true knowing," as is suggested by Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, Hegel's *Wissenschaft der Logik*, as well as Husserl's "*Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*." Thus, the word not only has nothing to do with what we in English refer to as the "natural sciences." Heidegger's reliance on "*Wissenschaft*"—a central motif in his important texts from 1929 to 1935—also strives to differentiate rigorous philosophical thought, in which the *Seinsfrage* occupies its rightful pride of place, from the "inferior" versions of *Wissenschaft* that were prominent in his day, such as neo-Kantianism, positivism, empiricism, and so forth.

science should exist at all has never been unconditionally necessary. But if science should exist, and should exist *for us and through us*, then under what conditions can it truly exist?

Only when we submit to the power of the *beginning* of our spiritual-historical existence. This beginning is the beginning [*Aufbruch*] of Greek philosophy. That is when, from the culture of one Volk and by the power of that Volk's language, Western man rises up for the first time against *the totality of what is* and questions it and comprehends it as the being that it is. All science is philosophy, whether it knows it and wills it or not. All science remains bound to that beginning of philosophy and draws from it the strength of its essence, assuming that it still remains at all equal to this beginning.

Here we want to recover for *our* existence two distinguishing characteristics of the original Greek essence of science.

Among the Greeks there circulated an old report that Prometheus had been the first philosopher. It is this Prometheus into whose mouth Aeschylus puts an adage that expresses the essence of knowledge:

*technē d'anangkes asthenestera makro*

"But knowledge is far less powerful than necessity." That means: all knowledge of things remains beforehand at the mercy of overpowering fate and fails before it.

It is precisely for that reason that knowledge must develop its highest defiance, for which alone the entire might of the concealedness of what is will first rise up, in order really to fail. Thus what is reveals itself in its unfathomable inalterability and confers its truth on knowledge. This adage about the creative impotence of knowledge is a saying of the Greeks, in whom we all too easily see the model for knowledge that is purely self-reliant and thus lost to the world; this knowledge is presented to us as the "theoretical" attitude. But what is *theoria* for the Greeks? It is said that it is pure contemplation, which remains bound only to its object in its fullness and in its demands. The Greeks are invoked to support the claim that this contemplative behavior is supposed to occur for its own sake. But this claim is incorrect. For, on the one hand, "theory" does not happen for its own sake; it happens only as a result of the passion to remain close to what is as such and to be beset by it. On the other hand, however, the Greeks struggled to understand and

carry out this contemplative questioning as a—indeed as *the*—highest mode of man's *energeia*, of man's "being at work." It was not their wish to bring practice into line with theory, but the other way around: to understand theory as the supreme realization of genuine practice. For the Greeks science is not a "cultural treasure," but the innermost determining center of their entire existence as a Volk and a state. Science is also not merely the means of making the unconscious conscious, but the force that keeps all of existence in focus and embraces it.

{ Science is the questioning standing firm in the midst of the totality of being as it continually conceals itself. This active perseverance knows of its impotence in the face of Fate. }

That is the essence of science in its beginning. But have not two and a half millennia passed since this beginning? Has the progress that has occurred in human activity not changed science as well? Certainly! The Christian-theological interpretation of the world that followed, as well as the later mathematical-technical thinking of the modern age, have removed science from its beginnings both in time and in its objects [*zeitlich und sachlich*]. But that has by no means relegated the beginning itself to the past, let alone destroyed it. For, assuming that the original Greek science is something great, then the *beginning* of this great thing remains its *greatest* moment. The essence of science could not even be emptied and used up [*vernutzt*]—which it is today, all results and "international organizations" notwithstanding—if the greatness of the beginning did not *still* exist. The beginning *exists* still. It does not lie *behind* us as something long past, but it stands *before* us. The beginning has—as the greatest moment, which exists in advance—already passed indifferently over and beyond all that is to come and hence over and beyond us as well. The beginning has invaded our future; it stands there as the distant decree that orders us to recapture its greatness.

Only if we resolutely obey this decree to win back the greatness of the beginning, only then will science become the innermost necessity of our existence. Otherwise, science will remain something in which we become involved purely by chance or will remain a calm, pleasurable activity, an activity free of danger, which promotes the mere advancement of knowledge [*Kenntnisse*].

{ If, however, we obey the distant decree of the beginning, then science

must become the fundamental event of our spiritual existence as a Volk [*geistig-volklichen Daseins*].

And if our ownmost existence itself stands on the threshold of a great transformation; if it is true what the last German philosopher to passionately seek God, Friedrich Nietzsche, said: "God is dead"; if we must take seriously the abandonment of man today in the midst of Being, what then does this imply for science?

Then the Greeks' perseverance in the face of what is, a stance that was initially one of wonder and admiration, will be transformed into being completely exposed to and at the mercy of what is concealed and uncertain, that is, what is worthy of question. [Questioning will then no longer be simply the preliminary stage to the answer as knowledge, a stage that we can put behind us, but questioning will itself become the highest form of knowledge.] Questioning will then unfold its ownmost power for disclosing the essence of all things. Then questioning will compel us to simplify our gaze to the extreme in order to focus on what is inescapable.

Such questioning will shatter the encapsulation of the various fields of knowledge into separate disciplines; it will return them from the isolated fields and corners into which they have been scattered, without bounds and goals; and it will ground science once again directly in the fruitfulness and blessing of all the world-shaping forces of man's historical existence, such as: nature, history, language; the Volk, custom, the state; poetry, thought, belief; sickness, madness, death; law, economy, technology.

(If we will the essence of science in the sense of *the questioning, unsheltered standing firm in the midst of the uncertainty of the totality of being*, then *this* will to essence will create for our Volk a world of the innermost and most extreme danger, i.e., a truly *spiritual* world. For "spirit" is neither empty acumen nor the noncommittal play of wit nor the busy practice of never-ending rational analysis nor even world reason; rather, spirit is the determined resolve to the essence of Being, a resolve that is attuned to origins and knowing. And the *spiritual world* of a Volk is not its cultural superstructure, just as little as it is its arsenal of useful knowledge [*Kenntnisse*] and values; rather, it is the power that comes from preserving at the most profound level the forces that are

rooted in the soil and blood of a Volk, the power to arouse most inwardly and to shake most extensively the Volk's existence. A spiritual world alone will guarantee our Volk greatness. For it will make the constant decision between the will to greatness and the toleration of decline the law that establishes the pace for the march upon which our Volk has embarked on the way to its future history.

[If we will *this* essence of science, then the teachers of the university must really advance to the outermost positions where they will be exposed to the danger of the world's constant uncertainty.] If they stand firm there, i.e., if from there—in essential proximity to and beset by all things—there arises for them a common questioning and saying pervaded with a sense of community, then they will become strong enough to lead. For what is decisive in leading is not merely going ahead, but the strength to go alone, not out of obstinacy and the desire to dominate, but by virtue of the most profound destiny and the broadest obligations. Such strength binds to what is essential; it effects the selection of the best, and it awakens the genuine following [*Gefolgschaft*] of those who are of new courage [*neuen Mutes*]. But we do not need to first awaken such a following. The German students are on the march. And *whom* they are seeking, that is those leaders through whom they intend to elevate their own destiny to a grounded, knowing truth and to place it in the clarity of the interpreting-effective word and deed [*deutend-wirkenden Wortes und Werkes*].

Out of the resolve of the German students to stand firm in the face of the extreme distress of German fate comes a will to the essence of the university. This will is a true will, provided that the German students, through the new Student Law,\* place themselves under the law of their essence and thereby delimit this essence for the very first time. To give law to oneself is the highest freedom. The much praised "academic freedom" is being banished from the German university; for this freedom was false, because it was only negating. It meant predominantly lack of concern, arbitrariness in one's intentions and inclinations, lack of restraint in everything one does.] The German student's notion of

\*Translator's note: An example of *Gleichschaltung* legislation, the new Student Law of May 1, 1933 was intended to organize university students in accordance with the *Führerprinzip* in order thereby to ensure their integration within the National Socialist state.

freedom is now being returned to its truth. Out of this freedom will develop for German students certain bonds and forms of service.

The first bond is the one that binds to the ethnic and national community [*Volkgemeinschaft*].\* It entails the obligation to share fully, both passively and actively, in the toil, the striving, and the abilities of all estates and members of the Volk. This bond will henceforth be secured and rooted in student existence [*Dasein*] through *labor service*.

The second bond is the one that binds to the honor and the destiny of the nation in the midst of the other peoples of the world. It demands the readiness, secured in knowledge and ability and firmed up through discipline, to give one's utmost. This bond will in the future embrace and pervade all of student existence in the form of *military service*.

The third bond is the one that binds the students to the spiritual mission of the German Volk. This Volk is playing an active role in shaping its fate by placing its history into the openness of the overpowering might of all the world-shaping forces of human existence and by struggling ever anew to secure its spiritual world. Thus exposed to the extreme questionableness of its own existence, this Volk has the will to be a spiritual Volk. It demands of itself and for itself, and of its leaders and guardians, the hardest clarity that comes from the highest, broadest, and richest knowledge. Young students, who are venturing early into manhood and spreading their will over the destiny of the nation, are compelling themselves, thoroughly, to serve this knowledge. They will no longer permit *knowledge service* to be the dull, quick training for an "elegant" profession. Because the statesman and the teacher, the doctor and the judge, the pastor and the master builder lead the Volk in its existence as a Volk and a state and watch over this existence in its essential relations to the world-shaping forces of human Being and keep it focused, these professions and the education for them are entrusted to the knowledge service. Knowledge does not serve the professions, but the other way around: the professions realize and administer the Volk's highest and most essential knowledge, that of its entire existence. But for us this knowledge is not the calm taking note of essences and values in themselves; rather, it is the placing of one's existence in the most acute

\* Translator's note: *Volkgemeinschaft* was the National Socialist expression for the "national community, that is, a new, organic, communal social order bereft of the divisions and antagonisms of modern "society."

danger in the midst of overpowering Being. The questionableness of Being in general compels the Volk to work and struggle and forces it into its state, to which the professions belong.

The three bonds—*through* the Volk to the destiny of the state *in* its spiritual mission—are *equally original* aspects of the German essence. The three forms of service that follow from them—labor service, military service, and knowledge service—are equally necessary and of equal rank.

Knowledge of the Volk that is actively involved with the Volk, knowledge of the destiny of the state that holds itself in readiness; it is these that, together with the knowledge of the spiritual mission, first create the original and full essence of science, the realization of which has been given to us as our task—assuming that we obey what the beginning of our spiritual-historical existence decreed in the distant past.

It is *this* science that is meant when the essence of the German university is defined as the high school that, from science and through science, educates and disciplines the leaders and guardians of the fate of the German Volk.

*This* primordial concept of knowledge commits one not just to “objectivity,” but, first of all, to essential and simple questioning in the midst of the historical-spiritual world of the Volk. Indeed, it is only from here that objectivity can establish itself, i.e., find its character and limits.

Science in this sense must become the force that shapes the corporate body of the German university. This implies two things: first, the teachers and students must each in their own way be *seized* by the idea of science and *remain* seized by it. At the same time, however, this concept of science must penetrate into and transform the basic forms in which the teachers and students collectively pursue their respective scholarly activities: it must transform from within the *faculties* [*Fakultäten*] and the *disciplines* [*Fachschaften*].

The faculty will only be a faculty if it develops into a capacity for spiritual legislation, a capacity that is rooted in the essence of that faculty’s particular science, so that it can give shape to the forces of existence that beset *it* and fit them into the *one* spiritual world of the Volk.

The discipline will only be a discipline if it places itself from the very



outset within the realm of this spiritual legislation, thereby bringing down disciplinary barriers and overcoming the musty and false character of higher education as superficial professional training.

At the moment when the faculties and disciplines get the essential and simple questions of their science underway, the teachers and students will already be in the embrace of the *same* ultimate necessities and afflictions attendant to existence as a Volk and a state.

Giving form to the original essence of science, however, demands such a degree of rigorousness, responsibility, and superior patience that by comparison, for example, the conscientious observance or the zealous modification of fixed ways of doing things hardly matters.

If, however, the Greeks needed three centuries just to put the *question* of what knowledge is on the proper footing and on the secure path, then *we* certainly cannot think that the elucidation and unfolding of the essence of the German university can occur in the present or coming semester.

But there is, to be sure, *one thing* that we do know which follows from the essence of science as indicated above, and that is that the German university can only then attain form and power when the three forms of service—labor service, military service, and knowledge service—come together primordially into *one* formative force. That is to say:

The teachers' will to essence must awaken to the simplicity and breadth of the knowledge of the essence of science and grow strong. The students' will to essence must force itself into the highest clarity and discipline of knowledge and must shape, through its demands and determinations, the engaged knowledge of the Volk and its state and incorporate this knowledge into the essence of science. Both wills must ready themselves for mutual struggle. All capacities of will and thought, all strengths of the heart, and all capabilities of the body must be developed *through* struggle, must be intensified *in* struggle, and must remain preserved *as* struggle.

We choose the knowing struggle of those who question, and declare with Carl von Clausewitz: "I renounce the foolish hope in salvation by the hand of chance."

The community of teachers and students in struggle will, however, transform the German university into the site of spiritual legislation and

realize in it a concentrated center [*die Mitte der straffsten Sammlung*] for the highest service to the Volk in its state only if the teachers and students arrange their existence to be simpler, tougher, and more modest in its needs than that of all other *Volksgenossen*.<sup>\*</sup> All leadership must allow following to have its own strength. In each instance, however, to follow carries resistance within it. This essential opposition between leading and following must neither be covered over nor, indeed, obliterated altogether.

Struggle alone will keep this opposition open and implant within the entire body of teachers and students that fundamental mood out of which self-limiting self-assertion will empower resolute self-examination to true self-governance.

Do we will the essence of the German university, or do we not will it? It is up to us whether and how extensively we endeavor, wholeheartedly and not just casually, to bring about self-examination and self-assertion; or whether we—with the best intentions—merely alter the old arrangements and add some new ones. No one will prevent us from doing this.

But neither will anyone ask us whether we will it or do not will it when the spiritual strength of the West fails and the West starts to come apart at the seams, when this moribund pseudocivilization collapses into itself, pulling all forces into confusion and allowing them to suffocate in madness.

Whether such a thing occurs or does not occur, this depends solely on whether we as a historical-spiritual Volk will ourselves, still and again, or whether we will ourselves no longer. Each individual *has a part* in deciding this, even if, and precisely if, he seeks to evade this decision.

But it is our will that our Volk fulfill its historical mission.

We will ourselves. For the young and youngest elements of the Volk, which are already reaching beyond us, *have already decided* this.

We can only fully understand the glory and greatness of this new beginning, however, if we carry within ourselves that deep and broad thoughtfulness upon which the ancient wisdom of the Greeks drew in uttering the words:

<sup>\*</sup> Translator's note: *Volksgenossen* was the National Socialist term for a "comrade" or fellow Nazi.

## *The Self-Assertion of the German University*

*ta . . . megala panta episphale .*

“All that is great stands in the storm .

(Plato, *Republic*, 497d, 9)

*Translated by William S. Lewis\**

\*The translator would like to acknowledge the fact that he consulted with profit Karsten Harries' translation of "The Self-Assertion of the German University" in *The Review of Metaphysics* 38:467-481, 1985.